Introduction

Recovery is not only about abstaining from substances — it is a complex, emotional, psychological, and social reconstruction of the self. The group session described here started with a deceptively simple question:
“What do you think will happen if you succeed in treatment?”

At first, the answers reflected hope: *“I’ll be happy,” “I’ll be myself again.”* But as the group explored the question deeper, what emerged was pain: the pain of **grieving the old self**, the “high-functioning” addict, the thief, the drug dealer, the manipulator — the self who once felt in control. As clients began to realize that success would mean giving up not only drugs but also their **coping identities**, it became clear that recovery also meant **loss**, **ambivalence**, and **internal conflict**.

This emotional and behavioral contradiction reflects what **Émile Durkheim** described as the coercive power of **social facts** — values and norms so deeply internalized that breaking with them causes guilt, anger, and alienation. What these clients were facing was not just change, but rupture. As **Pierre Bourdieu** would put it, their **habitus** — their internalized set of dispositions and learned behaviors — was colliding with a new moral code. And this shift hurts.

Gabriel Tarde’s idea of **social imitation** helps us understand how clients struggle to detach from peer dynamics. Many of their habits and desires were not personal, but relational — shaped by the groups they belonged to. **Max Weber’s** theory of **meaningful action** reminds us that the old behaviors (stealing, dealing, manipulating) were never random: they were full of subjective meaning — agency, survival, control, identity.

From psychology, several key thinkers shed light on this process:

- **Sigmund Freud’s** concept of **resistance** is visible in their initial denial. Wanting happiness in recovery is genuine — but also a defense mechanism against grief and responsibility.
- **Carl Jung** would interpret this group session as a confrontation with the **shadow self** — the part of us that is hidden, wounded, and capable of harm. Healing requires integration, not denial.
- **B.F. Skinner** would analyze the clients’ behavior as conditioned responses: reward-based habits (money, power, relief) are now being replaced by delayed gratification — and the brain resists.

- **Albert Bandura’s** theory of **self-efficacy** is critical here. Recovery builds when clients begin to believe they can face triggers, cravings, and choices — and act differently.
- **Abraham Maslow** shows us that before reaching **self-actualization**, people must feel safe, loved, and respected. These women are rebuilding those foundations from the bottom up.
- **Carl Rogers’** emphasis on **unconditional positive regard** is mirrored in the way the group holds space for one another’s pain — allowing healing without judgment.
- **Erik Erikson’s** model of **psychosocial development** reminds us that adults in recovery are often stuck in earlier stages: struggling with autonomy, shame, identity, and trust.

What this session showed is that success in treatment is not a euphoric arrival — it's a **slow, painful, conscious process** of losing familiar roles and choosing new ones, even when they feel empty at first.

In that tension — between criminal thinking and emotional honesty, between instant pleasure and long-term growth — is where **real self-esteem is born**.

What Do You Think Is Going to Happen If You Succeed in Treatment?

Today, the topic of the group was handling the fear of success.
After they read, there was the question:
"What do you think is going to happen if you succeed in treatment?"
I asked them to answer that individually. The answers were:

- I will be me again
- I will be happy

Most of them said they would be happy.

I told them: **"You are lying to yourselves."**
They looked at me very surprised, and some of them looked at me like I was weird.
I told them I was going to explain and make a point.

So I started with one of the clients. I asked her:
"Let’s suppose it's Friday night and you are home, at your

window. Then you see your old friends driving past your house in their cars, and you know exactly where they are going. You know they are going to that club that you like so much. What do you think you are going to feel at that moment? Do you think you are going to jump and scream, very happy to be in recovery?"

Her answer was:
"No! I will be mad, BECAUSE I CAN'T GO WITH THEM."

I asked another client:
"You were selling drugs, right? So let's suppose you go to a shopping center, and you see a lot of stuff that you would like to have right then. But now, you have to wait for your paycheck, so you're not going to be able to buy it. What do you think you are going to think and feel? Are you going to be happy at that exact moment? Are you going to feel grateful?"

Her answer was:
"No! I'm going to think that if I was selling drugs, I wouldn't have a problem with that. I would be mad!"

I asked another client:
"You were talking this morning that you were a thief, and you stole a jacket from a store. So now, let's suppose that you go to a store and you see this amazing, beautiful jacket, but because you're in recovery, you cannot steal it. What do you think you are going to feel? Are you going to be happy?"

Her answer was:
"No! I will be mad, and I will start to think that if it was in my old times, I would know exactly how to get that jacket without paying for it."

Then I asked everyone a simple question:
"Has it already happened to you that you are paying for something, and the woman giving you your change back makes a mistake and gives you more money than she should? At that moment, do you negotiate with yourself whether you should be honest and tell her she made a mistake?"

The general answers were:
"Yes. I would negotiate. Yes, I would be between giving her the money back or not."

One of them said:
"I wouldn’t. It already happened to me and I gave her the money right away."

My answer to her was:
"And that happened because you are codependent!"
She looked at me very surprised.

I explained to her. I said:
"Follow me. What is the difference between when you stole the jacket from the hanger and when the woman gave you more money? Let me explain: when you're stealing something from a hanger, you don’t see a face. You know that jacket belongs to Walmart, but you don’t know the owners, so you're stealing from an institution. That means you don’t get emotional, because you don’t see their faces — no feelings. But when that woman gave you more money, you were watching her face, so you became emotional. And because you're codependent, you felt the need to rescue her from her mistake. So you said, ‘Here ma’am, this money belongs to you.’”

Yep, makes sense.

So the conclusion of the group was:
Are you really going to be happy when you're not able to be with your old friends?
Not able to go to old places?
Happy waiting for your paycheck?
Happy paying bills?
Happy because you cannot steal or play with other people’s feelings?

Of course NOT!
It’s going to be hard, and you will be attacked by your criminal thinking.
That will bring pain — because that means **GRIEF = LOSS**.
That’s what Step 1 is about: **grief and loss.**

But now let me tell you something:
You think that not using drugs is what is going to give you self-esteem?
Wrong!

Being clean is not the same as being in recovery.

What’s going to bring you self-esteem is exactly what we are talking about in this group.
It’s knowing you could — but you don’t. You keep it real, and you won’t.

It doesn’t matter how hard it is for you not to go with your friends, not to steal, not to go to old places. You keep choosing to go through that pain in order to grow.

Self-esteem is when you win the fight between criminal thinking / offender behavior and healthy behavior — no matter how hard it is.

If you do that, one day you will be able to look back and see how far you’ve gone in your recovery, and how you won those little internal fights between sanity and insanity.

So the point is: clients need to **keep it real**, and be aware that the beginning of recovery is not just roses.
They need to know that, in order to be in recovery, they will **lose something to gain something else**.
They need to understand that it can be hard — and that’s okay.
That way, they will understand it’s a **process**, and it will take **time**.

False expectations are one of the biggest relapse triggers.
Being aware is being conscious of what’s around you — and once you're aware, you can make choices.
And when you can choose, you’re no longer confused or afraid.

Escrito por Ivone do Vale,

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